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ABSTRACT

To understand the realities and complexities faced by beginning primary school principals, a group of researchers from Belgium, Canada, England, the Netherlands, and the United States launched a collaborative study in 2000. This report describes the Belgium arm of the study. The study set out to answer the following: What are similarities and differences in the work of school principals in different countries? What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to the principalship? How do new principals perceive and deal with external influences? How do new principals adjust to their role? How does the culture of the school evolve with the arrival of the new principal? The sample for the Belgium study consisted of 174 principals. Data were gathered from an initial questionnaire and followup interviews. The main findings included the following: Some 80 percent of the principals perceived the job as an opportunity to build a valuable career. Being trusted and accepted by teachers and parents was the most positive experience for the principals. On the other side of the coin, principals often experienced a noncollaborative school climate and turbulent policy environment, making it difficult to resolve conflicts. Appended are data about the principals and their schools. (Contains 21 references.)(WFA)

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SYMPOSIUM: **Leaders for a global society: Western and Eastern perspectives on the professional induction of beginning elementary school principals**

Beginning primary school principals in Belgium: how they deal with external influences and develop professionally

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Beginning Primary School Principals in Belgium: how they deal with external influences and develop professionally*

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1. International context of the study

In order to understand the realities and complexities faced by beginning primary school principals, three years ago, a group of researchers from Belgium, Canada, England, the Netherlands, and the United States have launched a collaborative research study, referred to as the International Beginning Principal Study (IBPS) (for more information see Barnett, 2001, a). At the launch of this collaborative study the researchers were convinced that the job of being a school principal/head has greatly increased in complexity, difficulty and challenges since the earlier UK Study (Weindling & Early, 1987; see also Weindling 2000) and US Study (Parkay & Hall, 1992). Although there are numerous contextual differences among the participating countries, the strength of the IBPS is that similar information about new principals in different countries is gathered, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons. The research teams anticipated to gain new insights about how cultural and structural differences affect the novices' motives for accepting the job, the novices' assessment of their beginning experiences, their preparation for their roles, the ongoing professional development and the professional support needed to do the job effectively.

During the AERA-meeting in New Orleans (2000) the group met for the first time; the discussion and first exploration of the main research themes resulted in the following research questions:

- What are similarities and differences in the work of school principals in different countries?
- What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to the principalship?
- How do new principals perceive and deal with external influences?
- What learning experiences help new principals adjust to their role?
- How do new principals become socialized into their role?
- How does the culture of the school evolve with the arrival of the new principal ? (Barnett, 2001, a, p. 2).

A first version of a written questionnaire was made by several members of the international team, comments and suggestions were collected and used for a revision of the first draft. The final drafts of the different national questionnaires were compared by Bruce Barnett (Univ. of Northern Colorado) in March 2001. The similarities - in terms of research questions and

* Only beginning principals in the Dutch speaking part (Flanders) of Belgium were involved in this study

specific questionnaire questions - were quite obvious. Some first findings were presented during the AERA-meeting (2001) in Seattle (Barnett, 2001, a, b; Male, 2001).

2. Changing policy context and complexity of the principals' job

2.1. Working in a turbulent policy environment

Being a principal nowadays means being continually confronted with disconnected demands, with expectations of a very different nature linked to different aspects of the daily operation of a school and with conflicting demands of several external constituencies. As a result over the past decade the job became dramatically more complex, overloaded, overwhelming and in some cases unclear (see also Vandenberghe, 1992, 1995, 1998; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2001; van der Vegt, Smyth & Vandenberghe, 2001).

When schools exist in a turbulent policy environment, characterized by a set of general and sometimes vague goals, ill-defined expectations, constantly changing requirements and administrative rules, one task of the principal assumes prominence. Principals must be able to justify permanently the general and specific decisions they make, because schools are organizations with normatively defined responsibilities. Even as schools adapt to meeting the changing demands of the policy environment, they are expected to guarantee an education of high quality. Thus a central task of a principal is to justify or legitimate the school's internal operation in the eyes of the external constituencies. However, the pressure to justify the school's operation does not only apply to external constituencies; there is also the pressure on the principal to legitimate his or her decisions with the staff. In general, with central deregulation, more decisions fall within the domain of the principal, leading to increased pressure on principals for justification of decisions.

A second observation relates to the fact that principals are confronted with many innovations and improvement proposals of a different nature and even for the best schools, it's really impossible to implement simultaneously all these proposals in an acceptable way. This means that principals not only must be able to justify decisions related to these diverse innovations and projects, but also to steer and control the daily implementation activities once a decision is made. In other words: control means choosing priorities, working with limited resources and time constraints, trying to understand resistance and teachers' concerns, doing the right interventions, etc... An effective leader must be able to control all these aspects, in order to keep or enhance his/her sense of efficacy (Van der Vegt, Smyth & Vandenberghe, 2001).

And thirdly, one day in the life of a principal is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation and unpredictability. Many different unplanned and unexpected events are part of the daily life. The planning of a team meeting is interrupted by a long phone call from a parent; the coaching of a new teacher, planned for today, must be postponed because of a conflict between two senior teachers; a discussion with two teachers about some activities proposed last week by the principal takes more time than expected and there is no time left for an evaluation of new teaching materials, etc... These and other examples led to the conclusion that an effective principal must be able to lead his/her school and the daily operations in a very flexible way. So, flexibility became an inherent characteristic of effective school leadership.

The changing and sometimes difficult to achieve expectations and related demands, as part of a turbulent policy environment have a serious impact on the way a principal is experiencing his or her job, on how principals realize their role and on how the professional development of principals evolves.

2.2. Becoming a principal: a difficult decision!

For principals in general and certainly for beginning principals in particular, it is not easy to work and develop professionally in a turbulent policy environment. As a result, teachers hesitate to become principal. Those who are interested in leadership activities wonder if they have the needed knowledge and capacities to manage a school and collaborate with teachers. Summarizing what nowadays is expected from a principal, Evans (in: Fullan, 2001, p. 141) presents a rather pessimistic picture: "Wanted: a miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of papers and work double shifts (75 nights a year). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace only personnel, or upset any constituency."

Based on a limited literature review also Hertling (2001) points to many factors that make the principalship highly stressful:

- long hours - for most - a 60- to 80-hour work week;
- workload and complexity of job;
- supervision of evening activities "unending";
- minimal pay difference between a top teacher and an administrator;
- feeling overwhelmed with very high expectations;
- state and district mandates that require "mountains" of paper work;
- increasingly complex society and social problems.

And taking into consideration other findings, she comes to the conclusion that: "Erosion of authority to effect change, escalating expectations of accountability, lack of support, and a stressful political environment for school leaders are other factors that cause principals either to consider leaving the field entirely or to request classroom teaching assignments".

Similar findings are presented by Early, Evans, Collarbone, Gold & Halpin (2002) in a recent study in which 758 heads (primary schools; secondary schools; schools for special education) were involved. "The most de-motivating aspect of headship mentioned by the survey respondents was 'bureaucracy and paperwork', which were seen as overbearing and not always necessary. Over one-half of these headteachers answering this open-ended question gave these as the aspects of the job they did not enjoy. Constant change was also seen in a negative light by a quarter of those responding. Other key aspects which headteachers mentioned as de-motivating were: budget and resources issues (noted by just over one-in-five); the low status and negative media image of the professions (noted by around one-in-six); more generalized comments about stress and the demands of the job (about a fifth); and problems with recruitment (noted by just over a fifth) (p. 39).

Although sometimes organized in a different way, the same categories of problems or specific problems are described and discussed in studies concerning beginning principals (see Dunning, 1996; Barnett, 2000b; Male, 2000; Erlandson, 1994; Daresh & Male, 2000).

Given this complex and difficult to manage situation, it does not come as a surprise that many principals consider leaving the job early (see for instance, Earley a.o., p. 26-27). But at the same time it is the right time to ask the question: *What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to principalship ?*

2.3. Beginning principals: interacting with external policies and expectations and building an internal leadership.

Analysing recent developments for instance in the educational policy in Flanders, one comes easily to the conclusion that a general strategy has been to centralise educational policy (by new laws, but also by creating new specific administrative rules and procedures and launching national improvement projects) while at the same time placing the responsibility for the implementation of policies at the school. Principals experience a tension: how to find a workable balance between centrally directed policies and changes (as part of the policy to improve the quality of the education system) and a locally developed improvement plan? Finding this balance has proved most difficult to achieve in practice.

That means that principals are supposed to be able to translate a national policy into local plans and activities taking into consideration the possibilities but also the limits of the school. Translating a national policy into a local improvement plan is one of the main tasks of a principal and certainly not an easy one. This type of "translation" implies also that sometimes it is necessary to protect the local school against some unrealistic expectations and proposals coming from the government or other external agencies. So, a principal is not only a translator, but also a "buffer" trying to decrease the unrealistic external pressure.

In summary: school principals are being urged to become strategic leaders and thinkers, who are capable of managing the internal realities of the school while monitoring the external forces that impact their organization. Creating a direction for their schools, doing this in a legitimated way and also monitoring different types of external forces, trends and realities is a complex and difficult to plan task (Barnett, 2001, c; Vandenberghe, 1998). Therefore, it is interesting to ask the question: *how do principals perceive and deal with external influences?* And related to this question: *to what extent is it possible for a principal - given some external constraints - to develop autonomously a local policy?*

2.4. Professional development: supporting and inhibiting factors

Being confronted with a complex job and difficult to entangle situations (see 2.2), being expected to keep the boat floating, even if it is almost impossible to predict the local and national policy "whether", being confronted with the task to develop a local policy within the boundaries of a national policy that sometimes sends conflicting messages (see 2.3), it worthwhile and conceptually challenging to unravel the professional development of beginning principals.

It is right to assume that a beginning principal is daily experiencing successes but also failures; it is clear from observations that after some months some principals are able to solve a particular problem efficiently, while at the same time other problems remain unsolvable. These kinds of experiences have undoubtedly an impact on the professional growth and on the way beginning principals construct for themselves a meaningful job.

Professional growth is the result of having many different positive and negative experiences. These experiences, and above all the way in which these experiences are evaluated and interpreted, create for beginning principals an environment that gives room for growth and development or inhibit the necessary professional development.

So, it is appropriate to ask the question: *what learning experiences help new principals to develop professionals,* and also: *How do new principals become socialized into their role?*

3. Collecting questionnaire-data (phase 1) and preparing a follow-up study (phase 2)[1]

3.1. Questionnaire construction

Six major research questions were presented in paragraph one and three of these questions are further elaborated in paragraph 2. Here, an overview is given of the specific questionnaire questions (QQ) and how these questions are linked to the main research questions (RQ).

RQ What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to the principalship?

QQ: - Briefly describe the most important reason for your acceptance of the principalship. In other words, what attracted you to the principalship?

- Prior to accepting the position of principal, you probably had some doubts. What was the most important doubt?

- What, in your opinion, are the two most important reasons for being selected for the position?

RQ How is the professional development of principals affected by prior experiences?

QQ: - Did you prepare yourself in a particular manner?
- Describe briefly two previous experiences that are useful now and indicate the functions in which you acquired these experiences (e.g. as a teacher, counsellor, soccer coach, etc.)

RQ: How do new principals perceive and deal with external influences? And from which external agencies do they experience support?

QQ - Identify three factors (e.g. organizations, people) outside the school that have influenced you and your work and describe how you have dealt with these factors

-You experience daily pressure from outside the school. You have to meet different expectations. You are supposed to consider several proposals, etc...
Here is a list of factors outside the school that probably influence you as a principal. Please indicate the degree (from 1 to 4) of influence or pressure (1=no, or little pressure; 2=

[1] This paper only contains the presentation of the main findings of phase 1.

somewhat pressure; 3= strong pressure; 4 = very strong pressure):

- Central administration (Department of Education)
- Central (national) educational legislation
- National umbrella organizations
- The new law for Primary Education
- National and centrally designed improvement projects
- National standards and curricula
- Local parent association
- Daily informal contact with parents
- Educational advisors (or other professional supporting organizations)
- Inspectorate
- Other professional organizations
- Organizations for in-service training
- Local school board
- Other (please complete)

Please put an X besides 4 for those organizations/factors that also offer regular support.

- To whom do you return regularly for advice about performing your role? (list organizations, positions or roles, not name of individuals).

RQ What learning experiences help prepare new principals adjust to their role?

QQ
- Describe briefly two recent positive experiences
- Why do you consider these experiences positively?
- Describe briefly two recent negative experiences
- Why do you consider the experiences negatively?
- What are three significant insights/lessons you have learned about being a principal?
- Describe briefly two tasks that you consider as easy tasks.
- Why do you consider these tasks as easy tasks?
- Describe briefly two tasks that you consider as difficult tasks.
- Why do you consider these tasks as difficult tasks?
- Since becoming a principal, what additional skills and/or knowledge do you need to be an effective school leader?
- Describe the urgent problems for which you need a solution now.

RQ What are some main characteristics of the daily work of a beginning primary school principal?

QQ - Estimate the average number of hours you spend in each of the following activities during a typical full work week (not at the beginning of the school year; not just before a holiday; not at the end of the school year). Try to estimate as accurately as possible:

- Educational matters (quality control; visiting classrooms; discussions about student progress; analysis of teaching plans; discussions about the local school plan; reading of manuals, textbooks etc...)

- Planning and organisation of activities inside and outside the school (teaching schedules; arranging activities for substitute teachers; preparation of staff meetings; community activities; attending parent meetings, etc...)

- Administrative matters (data entry and processing; dissemination of information; daily mailing; telephone calls; etc...)

- Contacts and meetings with external groups and organizations (Ministry of Education; inspectorate; parent association; other schools; unions; police; local school board, etc.)

- Management (budgets; infrastructure; library; audio-visual lab; computer classroom; etc...)

- Personal professional development (reading professional publications; attending workshops; attending local network seminars; etc...)

- Daily and direct contact with parents

- Classroom teaching (for those respondents who still have a part-time teaching task)

- In your school, some people or some specific task forces can help and support you. Indicate briefly for which tasks or activities you can rely on such internal structures.

- Is there a person in the school for administrative support? If yes, for how many hours a week? Describe briefly the main tasks of this person.

At the end of the questionnaire respondents were asked to give some personal information and some information about the school and were invited to give some additional comments about "being a beginning primary school principal".

3.2. Follow-up study

The analysis of the answers (see par. 5) offered an interesting and valuable set of insights about how beginning principals experience their job, how they struggle with a complex and sometimes unpredictable environment, how they create for themselves criteria by which they assess their personal professional development, and so on. But we also must accept the

limited value of questionnaire data given the main interest in the professional development of beginning principals. It is fair to assume that the answers given by the principals at a certain moment are to some extent influenced by very recent activities, problems they had to solve, some particular experiences with parents or the inspectorate, etc... Therefore, from the beginning a decision was made to plan a follow-up study during 18 months (spread over two school years). At the end of the questionnaire respondents were invited to express their interest and willingness to participate in phase 2 of the study. They got brief information about the purpose of the follow-up and about the format (a monthly telephone interview). We received 174 questionnaires (see par. 4) and 114 (65,5 %) indicated an interest in the follow-up study (see also note 1).

3.3. Try-out of the questionnaire

The first draft of the questionnaire was sent (in an English translation) to the other research teams and was extensively discussed with the Dutch colleagues. This first draft was also sent (February 2000) to ten beginning principal principals who were invited to look critically at the questionnaire. The following questions were suggested:

- are the questions clearly phrased;
- maybe some questions are redundant;
- maybe some important themes are missing
- is it clear how to answer the questions?

After one week these principals were interviewed by telephone. No fundamental remarks were made; all of them stressed the importance of the study, some of them suggested some additional themes and in some cases the interview lasted almost one hour because they wanted to talk about all the interesting but also frustrating problems they have to solve every day. The remarks were used to draft the final questionnaire.

4. Data collection procedure and sample

To identify potential respondents the researcher contacted the central administration of the Department of Education and also the National Umbrella Organization for Catholic Schools and the National Umbrella Organization for provincial and local authority schools. They provided names and addresses from 310 principals. Careful analysis of these list and also using additional information made clear that within this group a distinction should be made between a group of principals who started in September 2000 and received the questionnaire in November 2000 (n=161) and another group of principals, already being principal between 1 and 3 years (n=149). In other words, the total population of the "real" beginning primary school principals population could be involved in the study.

From the first group 99 (response rate 61,5 %) and 75 (50,3%) principals of the other group send back the questionnaire. From now on, the first group will be called the A-group and the other one the B-group.

The A-group was representative for the population of the "real" beginning principals. There were also no significant differences between the responders and non-responders[2]. (For more information, see Vandenberghe, Daniels, Dierynck & Joris, 2003). It was not possible, due to a lack of information about the population of the B-group, to check the representativeness. In table 1 some additional information is given about the respondents and their schools (for more information: Vandenberghe et al., 2003).

Table 1: respondents (A) and school (B) information*

		A-Group	B-Group
A	Male	60 (60%)	38 (50,6 %)
	Female	39 (40%)	37 (49,4 %)
	Main age group: 36-45 years	57 (58 %)	40 (54 %)
	Teaching experience: Main cat.: 16-20 years	42 (42%)	26 (35 %)
	Previously taught in grade 5 or 6	55 (56%)	33 (45 %)
	Taught in another school	48 (49%)	31 (42 %)
B	Number of full time teachers: Main cat.: 6-15	56 (60%)	41 (63 %)
	Number of part-time Teachers: main cat. 1-5	57 (61%)	34 (52 %)

* for more information: see appendix 1 and 2

5. Data-analysis

Almost all the questions are "open questions"; the principals were asked to give short answers. In a first step all the answers were stored using Nud*ist®4. By doing so and by considering each answer as a "text unit", it was possible to describe each answer by a code representing a category of particular responses.
Using 15 questionnaires (from the A-group) three members of the research team independently constructed "response categories" for each question. In other words, a number of specific answers were grouped into one category given the same underlying meaning. The first draft of these "response categories" was discussed among the members of the Dutch and Flemish research team. In a next step all the answers given by the respondents of the A-group were coded, codes were compared and the formulation of some response categories were refined and adapted. This led to a first code-book (see Vandenberghe, et al., 2003). Next, the answers of the B-group were coded and again discussed among the members of the research teams. Some minor adaptations were necessary and some codes for the A-group must be revised.

The interscorer-reliability was checked for two questions of the B-group (question 2 and 4: see par. 3). The scores ranged from 93% to 67%. The differences were discussed among the

[2] Lack of time (60,5 %) and not yet being appointed officially (23,3 %) were the main reasons for not sending back the questionnaire.

team members; these discussions led to a final code (for more information, see Vandenberghe et al., 2003).

6. Findings

The analysis of all the answers resulted in a very rich data set. In this paper only the results related to three main questions will be presented (see par. 2.2.; 2.3; 2.4)[3]. Potential significant differences between the A-and the B-group were systematically checked. Differences were found for a very few response categories. In the presentation of the findings for the total group (A + B) will be described first, and if necessary significant differences will be given.

6.1. Why do teachers want to become principal?

For 41% of the respondents, the development of a personal career is the main reason. They want to work beyond the traditional classroom borders, they accept some challenges and don't want to work routinely for the rest of their career. They are looking for new horizons and want to learn more about educational matters and to be involved in the local school policy.

38% felt passionate about a job offering the opportunity to 'implement their personal vision', to implement worthwhile improvement projects and they were eager to develop specific actions to improve their school. They did believe that a principal has the power to create a better school.

29% found motivation chiefly in the possibility to manage people, to coordinate and support a team and they hoped that they will have the opportunity to support some interesting team activities.

28% became principal for a very pragmatic reason: they were the only candidate and they were asked explicitly to become principal. Or: the requirements and profile were developed in a specific way resulting in the fact that there was actually one candidate who fitted the profile.

Lastly, 17% of the respondents became principal because they believed they have some leadership capacities and assumed that they will indeed become a successful leader.

In summary, the opportunity to develop a career, having a chance to implement a personal vision about education and a good school, and to create opportunities for school improvement were mentioned as the main reasons for becoming a principal. Linked to the previous reasons beginning principals believed they have also the right leadership capacities.

But there were also some serious doubts. 30% of the respondents were highly concerned about the combination of the job with a good family and social (e.g. hobby) life. They were concerned about the potential negative impact of the job on the family situation and were wondering about an acceptable use of their time.

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[3] These 3 questions are:

- What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to the principalship?
- How do principals perceive and deal with external influences?
- What learning experiences help new principals to develop professionally?

Some 23% of the principals had some personal concern as indicated in questions such as: do I have the needed knowledge and skills? Will I be able to cope with some specific issues such as collaboration with other administrators, how to handle conflicts among teachers, etc. ?

Typical and at the same time interesting is the observation that 22% of the principals didn't like to leave a familiar situation ("my school" - "my classroom") and believed that they will miss the children. Also 17% feared some critique and were concerned about losing some friends. And lastly 18% feared the workload and stress and indicated an unacceptable disproportion between the responsibilities and complexities of the job and their salary (B-group: 24%, A-group: 13%, $p = .052$).

6.2. How do principals perceive and deal with external influences?

As already discusses one of the main tasks nowadays for principals is to look at, explore and evaluate several external expectations and proposals, but at the same time assess these external pressures taking into consideration the possibilities and limits of the school. Given this evaluation and buffering tasks it is important to address the question how principals perceive and deal with external influences. Information concerning this theme was in a first step collected by a general question: "Identify these factors (e.g. organizations, people) outside the school that have influenced you and your work and describe how you have dealt with these factors".

As expected, the respondents indicated many different factors; some principals distinguished between a positive and negative influence. "Positive" means that they experience support, specific help and understanding. "Negative" means interventions or specific actions that complicate the life of a principal.

The influence of the family, partner or children was indicated by 40% of the principals and 25% explicitly talked about a positive influence (B-group: 31%; A-group: 17%; $p = 0.46$). Only 5% indicated a negative influence (arousal of tensions) among family members and some negative reactions from their children: "you are married with your school").

Also 40% reported they are influenced by a colleague-principal or the former principal of the school ("he or she still gives some help and inspiration"). 24% talked explicitly about a positive influence; only 4% experienced a negative influence.

As expected, 29% indicated a clear impact of the local school board (19% positive impact; 2% negative). They particularly pointed to the support of the chair or one particular board member. The local school board is seen as a source where the principal can meet people and where he/she can find solutions for daily problems.

25% experienced influences from the external educational advisors representing the National Umbrella Organizations. 21% also pointed to the impact of several courses and training activities in which they took part. They especially underlined the importance of the many informal contacts and discussions they had with fellow principals during the in-service-training sessions.

And lastly 19% talked about the influences coming from the parents. They experienced a positive appreciation, support and readiness to help. But they also indicated pressure, negative critic and lack of understanding.

The theme concerning external influences was also explored in a more structured and standardized way. A list of 13 external factors (organizations, persons) was presented and the principals were asked to indicate the degree of influence they experience using a four-point scale (1 = no or little influence or pressure, 4 = extremely strong influence or pressure). And they also were asked to indicate if they experienced support (yes-no). The main findings are summarized in the table 2.

Table 2: External influences and support

(1) Influence by/ Pressure from	(2) Average	(3) Category	(4) %	Support		
				(5) Average	(6) Yes	(7) No
- Implication of the new law on primary education	3.13	3	45 %	1.95	5 %	95 %
- National standards; new curricula	3.11	3	46 %	1.95	5 %	95 %
-National improvement projects proposed by the Department of Education	2.73	3	44 %	1.85	15 %	85 %
Inspectorate; school audit	2.69	3	32 %	1.84	16 %	84 %
Central administration	2.46	2	47 %	1.57	43 %	57 %
National legislation	2.45	2	50 %	1.96	4 %	96 %
National umbrella organizations	2.09	2	49 %	1.58	42 %	58 %
Local school board	2	2	51 %	1.35	65 %	35 %
External Educational advisors	1.94	2	53 %	1.16	84 %	16 %
Local parent association	1.93	2	47 %	1.29	71 %	29 %
Informal contacts with parents	1.91	2	42 %	1.75	25 %	75 %
Other professional organizations	1.90	2	54 %	1.37	63 %	37 %
In-service organizations	1.76	2	47 %	1.59	41 %	59 %

(1) overview of the 13 external "factors"; (2) average on a 4-point scale; (3) and (4): the category (on the 4-point scale) with the highest percentage and the percentage itself; (5) average of experienced support: 1= support; 2 = no support. So, the higher the average, the lesser the support. (6) and (7): percentage of respondents indicating support (yes) or no support (no).

The principals experienced a strong influence/pressure (average between 3.49 and 2.5) from four "factors". These four factors are linked in one or another way to the central level or the national policy. The new law on primary schools (1997) mandates the schools to develop a local curriculum (a so-called "school work plan" outlining the content and organization of teaching activities) and also a local plan for the professionalization of the team. In the near future each primary school is expected to develop a local assessment plan for the evaluation of the teachers. Each principal knows that this is an obligation and also knows that the

inspectorate, in the context of an audit, will control this. A similar pressure was experienced from (the publication of) the national standards and the curricula linked to these standards. The national Ministry of Education, concerned about the quality of the educational system, has published lists of so-called "attainment targets" and the inspectorate will control (every 5/6 years) if the school indeed achieves the national standards. And in order to achieve the national standards schools are expected to implement new curricula developed and proposed by the Umbrella Organizations, but approved by the central administration.

More recently, the Ministry of Education has also launched a number of school improvement projects and in most cases schools participating in these projects get temporarily some advantages (more money, expansion of the staff, extra external support). But at the same time they have to take into consideration some official rules, regulations and procedures. And here too the principal knows that the local implementation will be controlled by the inspectorate. Looking at the three categories described until now, it is quite clear that beginning principals experienced "strong pressure" from formal central expectations (standards; curricula; demands related to new laws) and centrally offered and organized projects. Schools (and the principal in particular) are expected to develop a locally adapted answer to central expectations, demands and projects. Locally adapted means that there is no one "standard" reaction to all these demands; there is the assumption that the school has the necessary innovative capacity to respond adequately to these demands. And this situation creates "strong pressure", also taking into consideration that the "local solution" will be controlled by the inspectorate. In other words: a situation characterized simultaneously by the existence of a national policy implying pressure, autonomy and responsibility of the local school for the implementation of a national policy, some degree of uncertainty, and control by the inspectorate creates "strong pressure".

Also the inspectorate was perceived as an external organization that creates "strong pressure". The inspectorate, representing the national (educational) authority controls the quality of the teaching activities and students' achievements. Each visit leads to an audit report in which the quality of the school is described, using several indicators. Here too, there is a tension between the autonomy of the local school and the national expectations. And beginning principals frequently explained that they don't know how the inspection proceeds, what exactly happens during the school audit, which specific criteria are used, etc... In general terms, it is acceptable to conclude that principals experiencing a high responsibility pointed out that they feel strongly influenced and controlled by a central authority that has the power to give a positive or negative evaluation.

The respondents indicated further that the nine other "factors" give "some pressure" (average between 2.49 and 1.5), but unlike the four factors giving "strong pressure", they experienced also some support (see column 6 and 7). Beginning principals noticed "some pressure" from the central administration (e.g. there are rules, administrative procedures, deadlines for sending some information to the central administration, procedures for using the school budget, et...) and from the National legislation (e.g.: how should new laws be interpreted; what are the consequences for our school; where can I find more information, etc). But it is remarkable that 43%of the principals indicating "strong pressure" related to the central administration, also indicated they get some help and support (see column 6 and 7).

The respondents also experienced "some pressure" from the Umbrella organizations and from the Local School Board, but also some support. And we found the same pattern looking at the influence of the other factors (persons, organizations).

From these results, it is clear that coping and negotiating with different types of external influences is a prominent task of a school leader. The most obvious manifestation of external influences and pressure are related to an inherent tension between the national central level (with many general demands and requirements) and the autonomy and responsibility for the local implementation of these requirements. Feeling outside pressure and at the same time being responsible for a local answer and also knowing that the school (e.g. the principal) will be controlled lead to a situation in which most of the principals feel at least uncomfortable, and sometimes, according to one principal "locked in a national system of unclear expectations, changing rules and unclear procedures".

And asked who they regularly consult for advice or more information, 73% of the beginning principals indicated that they contacted colleague principals. 44% contacted external change facilitators. 24% said they consult the former principal (A-group: 12%; B-group: 23%; p=.065) and 27% consulted the local school board.

This means that beginning primary school principals consult people who have "practical knowledge". There is the assumption that people having experienced the same problems, being confronted with the same questions, are very helpful sources. Principals are looking for "practical knowledge" and "workable answers" and therefore they consult people who also went through the same experiences as beginning principals have now.

6.3. What learning experiences help new principals to develop professionally?

We assume that positive and negative experiences, but also experiencing personal efficacy in solving daily problems, influence directly the professional development of principals. In other words: on-the-job learning is linked to what happens daily in a school and how these experiences are evaluated and interpreted.

Therefore, respondents were asked to describe two recent positive and negative experiences and to explain why they label an experience 'positive' or 'negative'. They also were invited to describe briefly two tasks they consider "easy" and two tasks that are still "difficult" for them. And here too a further explanation was asked ("why?").

6.3.1. Positive experiences

For 54% of the principals positive experiences were related to "being trusted and appreciated by the teachers". Teachers trust the leader and accept the way the principal is doing his/her job; teachers appreciate the principals' efforts. As a result the principal felt not only accepted by the team, but he or she also experienced a high degree of open and collaborative climate. In other words, the affective aspect of the job seems to be important for the professional development of primary school principals.

38% of the respondents pointed to similar experiences with parents: there are many positive contacts and during informal talks the principals get positive feedback. They felt accepted by the parents and experienced good and meaningful cooperation.

When asked about positive experiences 35% gave examples that indicated a high degree of personal efficacy and a high level of job satisfaction. They personally believed they succeed in achieving goals they find important, they successfully coordinate some important tasks and activities and felt satisfied; sometimes they referred to a growing positive self-esteem. These

experiences also point to a central finding, that a positive professional development is largely determined by being able to have a personal impact on the school and the team. Principals perceived their job as interesting, enriching and challenging.

Related to their findings, 27% of the principals felt they belong to a collaborative team and this is experienced as an important source for job satisfaction and their personal professional development. There are no conflicts among team members, there is a collective effort and concern about "making a good school", the team members work hard for achieving a number of shared goals and they support each other.

And lastly 20% of the principals experienced trust, support and cooperation from several external organizations (local board; individual inspectors, etc...).

In summary: positive experiences, as a source for professional development, are related to being highly appreciated by people inside and outside the school; principals experience their job as an opportunity to achieve their personal vision about education and observe every day that this vision is accepted by the team given the many efforts and high degree of collaboration among the team members. All these result in a high degree of personal efficacy and job satisfaction.

6.3.2. Negative experiences

From the beginning of the analysis of the specific descriptions of negative experiences, it was obvious that almost the same answer categories could be used as for the description of the positive experiences. 30% reported about conflicts and problems they have with an individual teacher or with a particular subteam. Some teachers didn't know how to work with these teachers and how they should motivate them. Principals believed that these team members have no consideration for the complexity of their job, which resulted in a general feeling "of not being accepted by the team or by some individuals".

23% reported similar problems with parents: principals talked about parents who do not accept any critique concerning their children, were not open for any solution and sometimes threatened the principal by announcing they would send their children to another school.

Work pressure and difficulties related to time management were considered by 19% of the respondents as reasons for negative experiences. They experienced no progress, they continuously felt confronted with the same problems, and some of them indicated clearly a lack of personal efficacy. Too many different tasks, escalating work pressure created a situation perceived by the principal as "a never-ending job that you take home". The result is that there was no time left for curriculum or for teaching issues.

17% of the respondents pointed to administrative problems; also 17% reported practical and financial problems and 11% indicated teachers' resistance against innovations.

So, there is a perception of work pressure and stress, and some beginning principals were confronted with material and financial problems, but the main negative experiences - that we assume inhibit professional development - were related to "human interactions", feelings of low efficacy and a lack of trust and appreciation. 60% of the principals explained these negative experiences in terms of "a confrontation with personal limits and being unable to solve problems or to create situations by which they can improve the uncomfortable

interactions with some team members". They felt to some extent disempowered and experienced growing frustrations. Secondly, 41 % of the principals explained negative experiences in terms of "being unable to live up to their own expectations" which sometimes led to demotivation and stress. They pointed to rumors, events, or specific reactions from team members and concluded that their goals and vision were not accepted.

6.3.3. "Easy" tasks

The daily organization of routine tasks, solving daily practical problems and planning some activities are by 40% of the principals considered as "easy to do". Communications with the staff but also with parents are labelled as "easy" tasks by 39%, while for 36% the daily administration (mail, telephone, teacher and pupil administration etc.) went easy. 22% of the principals indicated that preparing and chairing a staff meeting was easy for them.

Activities related to supporting and motivating teachers, promoting collaboration among teachers and helping teachers improve their teaching activities was only by 18% considered as "easy to do".

Tasks considered "easy to do" are linked to the daily ongoing organization and planning of activities happening during a school day. And principals also indicated that when they have to communicate with teachers or parents they feel at ease.

6.3.4. "Difficult" tasks

Although 36% the principals reported they no longer had difficulties with daily administrative tasks, 53% of their colleagues considered this still as "difficult to do". They especially referred to all kinds of documents and questionnaires to be filled out for the central administration. 36% reported problems related to time-management and 19% said that helping and assessing teachers is still very difficult. A lack of knowledge and not having the necessary skills were the main reasons for 60% of these difficulties.

6.3.5. Additional skills and/or knowledge

The additional skills and/or knowledge needed by the respondents were headed (51% of the respondents) by the desire to learn more about legal and administrative themes. Given the findings in the previous sections this is to some extent a surprise. We believe that this observation can be explained by referring to the simple fact that for the implementation of most of the centrally proposed improvement projects, the principals must know very well the legal background, how one can use extra budgets, how one can apply for additional staff, what the administrative rules are, etc…

Not surprising is that 40% of the principals asked for additional knowledge and skill training related to questions such as: how to communicate effectively, how to motivate teachers, how to build supportive relationships and how to support the professional development of the teachers (A-group: 49%, B-group: 28%; $p = 0.005$)

32% reported questions related to management skills: how to lead a school, coordinate activities and develop a local policy plan. Also questions concerning preparing and implementing decisions were noticed.

28% indicated needs related to the use of hard- and software for administrative purposes and 18% asked additional knowledge about recent findings in the domain of learning and instruction.

And lastly, but also interesting, 17% of the respondents asked questions about how to improve some "personal qualities", such as: how to become a better listener, how to become patient; etc…

But, in general, asked for additional knowledge and skills, most of the answers can be summarized in terms of "additional administrative and legal knowledge" and additional training for "social skills".

7. Summary and discussion

In this section we will try to interprete the main findings in a particular way in order to present a first set of acceptable assumptions about "professional development of beginning principals" and about some determinants of this process.

80% of the principals perceived "becoming a principal" as an (a) interesting opportunity to build up a valuable career and explore new horizons and create for themselves a new institutional identity (Gee, 2001); (b) they also believed that by taking up leadership they get a chance to improve their school and implement a personal vision about "good education" and "a good school"; (c) and they believed that opportunities to collaborate with a team was a good reason to accept the job. In other words they had created for themselves a "professional future". There were some doubts, but to some extent they had created for themselves a "life project". The actualization of this project crucially depends on the recognition by others (e.g. the teaching staff, parents, members of the local board, etc…) and the opportunities to create dialogical relations and different types of cooperation and interactions.

Asked about recent positive experiences, beginning principals reported about being trusted and accepted by teachers and parents; they also referred to a high degree of job satisfaction and personal efficacy because they believed they had opportunities to achieve their ideas about a good school and felt supported by the teams and the parents. In other words: they experienced *personal* (my personal career is progressing as expected) and *professional* (my school is making progress and the team is working in a collaborative climate as hoped) success. A *positive professional development* is characterized by a fit between a personal and professional project, the working conditions in the school and the resulting successes a principal experiences. Interactions and cooperation with people inside and outside the school favourably supported the principal, leading to the achievement of his or her 'life project'.

The data also indicate an opposite picture. Very soon some beginning principals experienced in the school a non-collaborative climate, but they don't know how to solve conflicts among teachers and believed that team members have no consideration for the complexity of the job. There is no room for successes, they are quickly confronted with their personal limits; this results into a low degree of job satisfaction and a low level of personal efficacy. In that case there is no fit between personal and professional goals and the working conditions in which the principal has to work daily. And such a situation is not at all favorable for a positive professional development.

Both, principals experiencing a positive or negative professional development, are confronted with a turbulent policy environment. And our data clearly indicate how beginning principals are impacted by different types of external influences. External legal mandates and also mandates for school reform are impacting principals. The data reveal that this external pressure has broad implications for principals such as having to work with external constituencies, create and facilitate collaborative decision-making, align local curriculum and teaching activities with national standards and curricula, interpret legal requirements, developing an accountability system for internal and external use. Today's "principals must become an interpreter of new laws, a program manager, an instructional leader, and a transformational leader" (Vandenberghe, Kelchtermans & Maes, 2000).

We personally believe that beginning principals experiencing a positive professional development will cope differently with this turbulent policy environment compared to those experiencing a less positive development. The follow-up study (phase 2) will provide the necessary data to describe accurately the two different developmental patterns.

Appendix 1: Additional information about the principals

AGE (respondents)

Year	A-group	B-group
27-35	12	19
36-40	38	20
41-45	19	20
46-50	19	12
51-65	11	3
Total	99	74*

*1 missing data

TEACHING EXPERIENCE (respondents)

Number of years	A-group	B-group
6-10	5	6
11-15	12	14
16-20	42	26
21-25	13	13
26-30	16	11
31-35	10	4
36-40	1	-
NA	-	1
Total	95	75

TAUGHT PREVIOUSLY IN GRADE... (respondents)

Grade*	Group A	Group B
1	21	14
2	9	6
3	18	8
4	15	10
5	27	15
6	28	18
Nursery School		
1	3	5
2	3	5
3	6	4
Special. Educ.	4	6
Remedial teacher	1	-
Second. School	1	1
NA	-	1
Total	95	75

*There are mix-age-groups in some classrooms (for instance a combination of grade 1 and 2; or grade 3 and 4).

Appendix 2: Additional information about the schools

NURSERY SCHOOLS: NUMBER OF CHILDREN

	A-group	B-group
- no NSch	17	11
- NSch	80	61
- NA	2	3

Nr Children	A-group	B-group
1-50	15	10
51-100	21	24
101-150	24	19
151-200	15	5
201-250	5	3

PRIMARY SCHOOLS: NUMBER OF CHILDREN

	A-group	B-group
- no P.Sch	9	7
- P. Sch	88	65
- NA	2	3

Nr Children	A-group	B-group
1-50	4	4
51-100	13	8
101-150	19	15
151-200	16	15
201-250	14	8
251-300	13	4
301-350	3	6
351-400	2	4
401-450	2	-
451-500	1	1
501-550	1	-

NURSERY SCHOOLS: NUMBER OF CLASSROOMS

	A-group	B-group
2-3	17	13
4-5	24	25
6-7	19	14
8-9	13	3
10 and more	7	5

PRIMARY SCHOOLS: NUMBER OF CLASSROOMS

	A-group	B-group
3-5	7	10
6-7	21	16
8-9	14	8
10-11	14	6
12-14	18	10
15 and more	13	14

NUMBER OF TEACHERS

FULL-TIME

	A-group	B-group
1-5	9	6
6-10	32	21
11-15	24	20
16-20	14	4
21-25	11	5
26-30	2	4
31 and more	1	5
NA	6	10

PART-TIME

	A-group	B-group
0	5	-
1-5	57	34
6-10	26	26
11-15	3	5
16 and more	2	1
NA	6	9

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